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A Defector's Story

Stefan Svirdlev is one of the few officers to defect from Bulgaria's feared secret service—and live to tell about it. In Munich, Svirdlev gave NEWSWEEK'S Zofia Smardz an insider's view of Bulgaria's enforcers in action. Her report:

Svirdlev is a short, baldish man with a face like a potato and dark, Balkan eyes. He is an impassioned nationalist; he deplores his country's domination by the Soviet Union; he is convinced that the KGB ordered the Bulgarians to kill the pope. "Bulgaria has no interest in killing a pope," he says, "but as a satellite country it has to carry out its orders. The more serious the task, the more trustworthy the weapon has to be."

Svirdlev was an officer in the Bulgarian Durszhavna Sigurnost when he fled after an unsuccessful power struggle in 1971. At the time, Svirdlev said, the DS had 40,000 employees—60 percent officers, the rest support personnel. The officers were never referred to as agents but rather as "investigators" or "intelligence gatherers." Recruiting officers selected several candidates and then picked the best. The chief criterion, Svirdlev says, was "absolute devotion to the regime, not only on the part of the candidate but of all those around him and with whom he comes into contact." After a candidate was selected, he filled out an application form. "Nobody chooses the DS," Svirdlev says. "The DS chooses them."

Svirdlev was chosen for the DS in 1966 after a distinguished 15-year stint with the Bulgarian border guard, which is closely aligned with the DS. He quickly rose to colonel, working with agents in Bulgaria. The operatives were called secret collaborators. They ran from blue-collar workers to generals. "A system of DS agents doubles the structure of life on every level," Svird-

lev says. In a factory, some agents were responsible for the factory as a whole and some only for individuals. The collaborators received instructions in secret meetings with DS officers. Secret collaborators abroad were usually foreign nationals, like Mehmet Ali Agca, who might get quick training in their own country or be brought to Bulgaria for lessons from the DS.

Dossiers: Svirdlev supervised the activities of all of the divisions of the local DS in Pernik. He was responsible for maintaining public order and for issuing permits for Bulgarians to travel abroad. In 1970 he was ordered by a special directive to take charge of "preventive work"—preparing extensive dossiers on everyone who might be considered dangerous to the regime. The suspects fell into 11 categories, including people who had belonged to political groups other than the Communist Party before the 1944 revolution; anyone who held key positions before 1944; all communists expelled from the party for favoring Titoism or Maoism—and the children of all "deviationists." In case of war with Bulgaria's neighbors, Svirdlev's orders were explicit: take all of the dangerous people to the center of the country—and kill them if the enemy approached.

The accumulating orders disillusioned Svirdlev. "Many communists became aware that Bulgaria was losing face because of its complete subordination to Moscow," he says. Between 1965 and 1971 there were

six coup attempts designed to break the Sofia-Moscow tie. Svirdlev joined one plot in 1969, then fled to Greece after an unsuccessful putsch. In 1971 Bulgaria sentenced him to death in absentia. Later that year he now lives a furtive existence in Munich, keeping his whereabouts a secret and looking over his shoulder. And for the first time in his life, the workers'-state cop is a laborer. "Now I work in a factory in Munich, and I find that that's all right," he says. "If I were 20 and had it all to do over again, I'd rather become a worker than do what I did."

